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ABSTRACT

In order to improve desegregation of the elementary schools, and the low achievement level of elementary schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students, the Massachusetts Board of Education placed a coordinated approach to improving urban schools first among its objectives. The following educational objectives were set for each school: (1) strengthening overall educational leadership; (2) identifying student strengths and needs, and providing programs and services to meet them; and (3) enabling school staff to acquire additional skills to manage and make coordinated, effective use of local, state, and Federal resources. Lessons from Massachusetts' desegregation efforts and from compensatory programs are discussed. Efforts to improve education should be focused on the school, not the school system or the student. The development of a coordinated strategy to improve education is outlined, and the state-level actions necessary for implementing such a strategy are identified. A brief list of references is included. (BJV)

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THE NEXT STEPS IN URBAN EDUCATION

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THE NEXT STEPS IN URBAN EDUCATION

Participation in the conference sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) on "Alternative Strategies in Compensatory Education" brought into focus for me a number of concerns about the educational equity efforts to which we have devoted so much attention in Massachusetts.

During my sixteen years as state director of equal educational opportunity, our legislature has adopted a succession of path-breaking funding programs designed to support the education of poor and minority children. These "carrots" have been paralleled by a series of "sticks," new requirements upon local school systems designed to prevent segregation and discrimination and to assure the right of students to an effective education. State education staff have employed the most varied forms of monitoring, exhortation, training, publications, litigation, and general nagging, and Boston in particular has been the object of state and Federal court orders on every imaginable aspect of education. As each new effort began, we thought that it would enable us to turn a corner in serving at-risk children. Why have the results been so disappointing when compared with our high expectations?

The two-day discussion of compensatory education came together in my mind with our recent discussions in Massachusetts. The comments that follow are expanded from the notes from which I reacted to several of the papers; they give a state perspective on an issue that is often seen in terms of Federal policy and local services.

The Problem

A review of the annual racial statistics in Massachusetts shows that we are reaching the outer limits of the desegregation strategies that have absorbed so much of our energies over the past decade. In a number of communities--Boston, Chelsea, Holyoke, Lawrence, Springfield--minority students are now in the majority and even our best efforts will leave some schools predominantly minority in enrollment. In others--Worcester, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Brockton--there is a continuing need to assure that the right steps are taken and the wrong ones avoided. In all cases, however, our attention can now turn to assuring that "equal opportunity" has specific educational content and produces results that make a difference in the lives of poor children.

At the same time, the recent school-by-school assessments required by our school reform legislation have documented in a systematic way what we have known all along: that those schools in which there is a high concentration of poor and minority students show very disappointing achievement levels. This is true even of some schools about which we are justly proud. Racial integration may be producing solid respect and friendship across racial differences.

Parents may feel that the school is responsive to their concerns. Teachers may take pride and satisfaction in their work. Students may enjoy going to school. All of this may be happening, and is happening in many urban schools. Yet students exhibit achievement lags in mastering essential skills and knowledge, not to mention the higher order ability to "put things together" without which the basics are of little use. The bill comes due in the intermediate and high school, when students suddenly flop, seem lost, become discouraged, lower their expectations, or quit in frustration although their elementary education has been in many respects a substantial success.

We have often said that desegregation of the elementary schools in Holyoke was a great success and was accompanied by solid educational improvements, but Hispanic students are dropping out of high school at an epidemic rate. Worcester could tell the same story, so could Cambridge and Springfield. Even Boston, where everything seems more complicated, can point with pride to a number of outstanding elementary schools with 75 percent minority enrollment, but lagging achievement of minority students at the secondary level.

What are we failing to do? How can we assure that the education provided in what are now several hundred desegregated schools can be as consistently solid as it is frequently exciting? How can we focus on achievement without turning our backs on what has been accomplished and learned through twenty years of desegregation effort?

In the operational plan for fiscal year 1987, the Massachusetts Board of Education placed a coordinated approach to improving urban schools first among its objectives. Rather than undertaking a statewide effort, the department will work with perhaps fifteen target schools. It intends to continue this work at an accelerating pace for at least five years until every school with a high proportion of poor and at-risk students has developed the capacity to educate them effectively. In the words of the plan:

> The Department will provide assistance to at least six school districts to strengthen programs and services in selected elementary schools enrolling low income and minority students. 1986 statewide assessment results will be used to select elementary schools in particular need of such assistance, as well as effective schools to serve as models and technical assistance centers. Specific educational objectives designed to benefit at least 3,000 students will be negotiated for each school with an emphasis on the following:
>
> - Strengthening overall educational leadership.
> - Identifying student strengths and needs, and providing programs and services to meet them.
> - Enabling school staff to acquire additional skills to manage and make coordinated, effective use of local, state, and Federal resources (from programs such as Chapter 1,

> Chapter 188 essential skills and dropout prevention, Chapter 636, transitional bilingual education, special education, gifted and talented, etc.) to reduce fragmentation of regular classroom instruction and unnecessary separation of students. (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1986, p. 2)

Now it is appropriate to become more specific about the steps through which such a new model of urban education could be implemented. Nothing in what follows is without ample precedent in Massachusetts schools and in the work of the Department of Education. Everything that will be proposed is directly supported by research and by experience. The appropriate starting point is this accumulated experience of what works—what can work—in urban schools.

We have learned something about what works and what does not work in desegregation, in creating effective urban schools, and in bringing about broad institutional change.

What Have We Learned From Our Desegregation Efforts?

- It is not enough to assign appropriate numbers of students to a school, and assume that will accomplish either racial integration or improved educational opportunities. A top-down strategy, like Boston's (apart from the magnet district), produces neither solid desegregation nor solid education.

- One of the strengths of a successful desegregation effort is that the staff of a school, and many parents, stretch and grow in response to a clearly articulated challenge. The new energies that become available can be applied directly to educational improvement.

- The central weakness of unsuccessful desegregation efforts is that the energies of staff and parents have not been awakened; instead they become passive and resentful. In short, desegregation only produces the desired results if there is a school-level commitment to making it work.

- Real integration does not occur unless at least two ingredients are present in each desegregated school: (1) a school climate characterized by fairness and mutual respect, and (2) consciously created opportunities for students to work together and learn from one another. These elements are more important than special curriculum units and activities explicitly concerned with race and ethnicity, but they do not replace them.

- The elements of parent choice were introduced into many desegregation plans as a way of minimizing mandatory reassignments. They have had the largely unanticipated

result of strengthening the sense that each school has a clear educational mission, for which it is accountable to parents. Preliminary evidence suggests that it has also had a positive impact on school quality.

- Desegregation can have the effect of raising the expectations for poor and minority students or, unfortunately, of confirming their "inferior" status through in-school segregation. In other words, it is a high-risk, high-gain strategy for placing them at the top of the educational agenda.

- The factors that make a desegregated school work well also make any school work better!

What Have We Learned From Compensatory Programs?

- Other students make a significant difference; poor students kept isolated with other poor students will not learn as much as poor students who are integrated with middle-class students. As Dean Marshall Smith of Stanford School of Education writes, "schools and communities with strong concentrations of poverty have an added negative effect on student achievement above and beyond the student's individual family status" (Smith, 1987, p. 115).

- Schools make a difference. It is not enough to "plug in" an extra program or resource if the school as a whole remains ineffectual. Some schools serving many poor children are effective, and it is possible to identify many of the characteristics that make them effective, including a clear and shared definition of educational mission, a strong leader who (in what is only an apparent paradox) supports collegial decision-making, continual accountability for results, and a conviction that every child can learn.

- Programs (e.g., Chapter 1, special education, bilingual education) are generally only as effective as their setting. It is important that they be aligned for mutual reinforcement with the overall framework within which students are being educated. A recent study suggests that only one classroom teacher in ten knew what the specialist teachers were doing with the children they "shared".

- The "pullout" approach to serving student needs, while it is necessary for some instructional strategies and for some educational needs, has serious drawbacks as the primary mode of providing extra help. Teachers frequently complain about the disruption of their classrooms, with students coming and going to suit the schedules of specialized

programs. Many have the impression that this is somehow mandated by Chapter 1, though it is not.

- Labeling of students for compensatory services can have the effect of enshrining low expectations for those students.

- Our present approaches, while they have been quite successful in their own terms, involve substantial educational costs that were not originally intended when the programs were developed:

  -- Chapter 1 has not only poured billions of Federal dollars into direct instruction of at-risk students, but also has changed the way in which educators think about their responsibilities. It is unlikely that we will ever return to a "sink or swim" attitude about children from poor families. At the same time, however the rigid separation of services and centralization of control in the interest of assuring that the most needy students are served--a response to early abuses of the program--may mean that some schools are actually worse off as a result of the program. "By increasing the control of the school from the outside," John Chubb (1987) of the Brookings Institution suggests, "it may discourage" the development of the characteristics of an effective school (p. 244).

  -- In special education the very success of the individualized approach and intensive additional attention has led to a demand for inclusion of more and more students, and to the development of a poorly understood category of "learning disability" that can mean almost anything. One critic has remarked that minority students are "slow" and need compensatory education, while White students are "learning disabled." Special education shows signs of being overwhelmed by demand.

  -- Bilingual education programs are experiencing difficulty connecting with the regular education program. Who should be served? For how long? Is the program's purpose primarily to provide a transition to the use of English, or to develop skills in another language, as well as a cultural heritage? Aren't these desirable goals for every student? Why would any student ever be asked to exit a bilingual program, if--as claimed--it is providing him the best of two educations? The principal may find herself presiding over two schools separated by more than language.

  -- State compensatory education and urban programs may create additional burdens for harried administrators, to the extent that the funding source insists upon yet

another set of goals and objectives to highlight the distinctive contribution of the program.

All of these programs—excellent in themselves—may contribute to the lessening of school-level autonomy. In the interest of quality control for the program, the conditions for quality in the school as a whole may be undermined. The program may end up serving as a palliative for steadily worsening education.

Schools can only be as dynamic and responsible as their environment will allow them to be. Control and regulation have only a very limited ability to improve education; bad schools don't become good schools by assigning more homework!

Larry Cuban (1987) of Stanford urges that:

> Federal or state strategies of school improvement that have goals aimed at changing complex behaviors in children and adults in schools and classrooms should focus less on control and regulation through existing structures and more on incentives and help for those who make on-site judgments . . . . In doing so, state and Federal agencies will need to increase schools' capacity to do what they need to do, while holding them responsible for outcomes. (p. 222)

Bringing Together a Coordinated Strategy

How can we put together what we have learned into a strategy that will make a significant difference?

Very little of lasting benefit has been accomplished in education by top-down mandate. Government can, with some success, prevent discrimination and other negative practices, but our ability to mandate real excellence is limited. Excellence in teaching and counseling must happen through individuals in daily contact with students, and it will happen only if they are somehow encouraged and supported to do more than the minimum.

As Edmund Burke observed:

> Our patience will achieve more than our force. . . . I have never yet seen any plan which has not been mended by the observations of those who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business. By a slow but well-sustained progress, the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first gives light to us in the second; and so, from light to light, we are conducted through the whole series. . . . From hence arises, not an excellence in simplicity, but, one far superior, an excellence in composition. (Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1789)

And Stanford's Larry Cuban (1987) urges that "state strategies of school improvement that have goals aimed at changing complex behaviors in children and adults in schools and classrooms should focus less on control and regulation through existing structures and more on incentives and help for those who make on-site judgments" (p. 222).

Several operational principles follow:

(1) The focus of our efforts should be on the school, not on the school system (which may have a number of fairly prosperous schools as well as schools with many poor and low-achieving students. This might well mean ranking individual schools state-wide on a measure of the presence of at-risk students (income, home language, identified needs, and other factors included), not on a measure of achievement as the primary selection criterion.

(2) The focus of our efforts should be on the school and not on the student who (unless his needs are very specialized) needs an effective overall school environment in order to receive a well-rounded education. It is important to think of the student, not in terms of discrete educational deficiencies to be treated, but "in the round," as an individual to be educated.

(3) In order to create an effective school environment for every student, supplemental programs (e.g., Chapter 1, special education, bilingual education, state compensatory and desegregation programs) should be tied closely to the core curriculum.

(4) This can happen only if the educational team in each school has the autonomy and flexibility to put together an educational program that makes sense and meets the diverse needs and strengths of the particular students in the school. This has been called "building commitment to goals among those who actually do the work."

(5) With this autonomy and flexibility must go a strong stress on accountability for results over a reasonable period of time.

(6) These "results" should include the intangibles of citizenship, character, reasoning and creativity, as well as the easily measured skills and knowledge. Note that these intangibles can be taught only in schools where such qualities are manifestly valued!

(7) A well-regulated system of parent choice among schools can free each faculty to develop distinctive approaches to excellence, while creating a natural form of accountability for results and for responsiveness to parents.

How Would This Strategy Play Out in a School?

(1) The school would have a coordinated system for identifying the educational needs and strengths of each student. For example, a student would not be assessed once for bilingual education and again for special needs. Strengthening the process of entry and exit assessments is a priority for bilingual education officials this year, while special education is planning to identify and disseminate models of student evaluation and placement.

(2) The school, not the discrete programs, would function as the basic unit of education, with a cohesive sense of its mission. It would no longer serve as the site for discrete programs with specialized staff "doing their thing" and controlled from "downtown." The principal would be fully responsible for all staff in the school, and for deploying them to assure that every student received the optimal education, taking into account individual needs and strengths.

(3) Although the principal would be finally accountable, the staff of the school would work together to develop and update schoolwide educational plans and to share information. As a unified faculty, they would set goals and objectives. This would require paid planning and coordinating time.

(4) In order to put these plans into effect, the staff would be encouraged to propose program and schedule modifications (such as extended day instruction and year-round or summer programs) as well as different ways of grouping staff and space.

(5) While pullout strategies would still have place, especially for students with highly atypical needs, they would be given less stress and would in no case be used for administrative convenience.

(6) The school-level plan would serve as the basis for state and Federal grants and plan approvals, as well as for local budgeting. California developed a consolidated form for state and Federal grants.

(7) Progress in implementing the clear goals and objectives in the school-level plan would be assessed every other year. One means of assessment would be state-mandated testing, but it would be supplemented by other sources of information including, possibly, something akin to the accreditation process of peer review.

(8) The goals and their assessment would cover more than basic skills and knowledge; each school would set goals for the development of character and citizenship, as well as for higher order thinking and expressive skills.

(9) The faculty would be encouraged to develop a distinctive approach to educational excellence, not a lowest-common-denominator compromise. Parents would have the opportunity to transfer their children to another school (without loss of services) if it offered an approach to education more consistent with their own. In this way parents would be specifically empowered and drawn into the educational process of a school with their wholehearted support.

(10) Desegregation and integration would continue to be an important element of this process:

- for educational progress (avoiding isolation of poor children)
- to assure that students from poor families are taught the whole curriculum, not a "dumbed-down" inner-city version
- for language development through contact with students whose first language is English
- for self-image (the concern of the Brown decision with the "hearts and minds" of students is not out-of-date!)

What Are the State-Level Actions Necessary?

- identification of target schools
- discussion of goal setting with each school
- funding of the planning process
- training for assessment and planning
- commitment of program managers to a flexible funding process
- relating the process to program funding cycles

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